If it's sick, how can we tell?: Four criteria for evaluating the health of journalism

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This paper seeks to address the highly pervasive discourse that journalism is 'in crisis' by outlining four criteria by which we might evaluate the 'health' of the practice (measures of both quantity and quality of output). It offers an extremely brief meta-level analysis of existing research, and posits that when judged according to these four criteria, journalism might actually in reasonable health, and that we ought to be far more optimistic about its future. This assessment therefore challenges the 'business-centric' evaluation which often dominates discussions (in the media as well as academia) about the profession's supposedly dire future.

Journalism is an indispensable profession within our society (see Cunningham 2003, 31; Fiske 1987, 281), and it is accepted wisdom that members of the public should be connecting and engaging with it on a regular basis in order to help them 'make sense of the world and to fulfil their role as citizens' (Dahlgren 1995, 53). In spite of its importance, however, journalism is, from all reports, in some sort of irreversible decline. In fact, so many people now have told us this that, in the words of Jonathan Gray, 'I feel justified in my laziness at not citing them' (Gray 2006a). To use just one example, however, the prologue to a 2009 conference organised at the University of Westminster in the UK, called 'Journalism in Crisis', manages to capture much of the concern in just a single paragraph:

> News journalism is in deep crisis. Newspaper readership is falling, the audience for television news shrinking, and young people in particular seem to be less interested in traditional forms of news consumption. 24-hour news channels on shoestring budgets fight over tiny audiences while even well established and committed news organisations like the BBC and New York Times are cutting budgets and laying off journalists. (University of Westminster 2009)

If it is indeed true, however, that journalism is in a deep crisis, what I would like to do in this very brief paper is to take a step back, and start afresh at the beginning by first asking the question: if it is, how do we know? Or, perhaps more accurately, how would we know? If all reports are that this profession is terminally ill, what are the symptoms on which such a diagnosis has been made? Are

there any? Or, is this just the 'feeling' of a few opinion-leaders looking at the past through rose-coloured glasses? If we are evaluating the issue without prejudice, then surely there are, or should be, some objective measures of success or failure. I would like to argue here that we should have objective measures which are distinct from what we would see as symptoms of 'crisis', and therefore less likely to be sensitive to inevitable temporal fluctuations. By which I mean that – just as we would do when evaluating anything – we surely need universal metrics which would (and should) remain the same, regardless of the expected outcome of the evaluation.

I am therefore proposing the following, admittedly interlinked, criteria against which we might evaluate the health of journalism in our society: to assess whether or not journalism is in crisis and, if so, how bad that crisis really is. They are four simple measures, encompassing both quality and quantity, in ascending order of importance:

- Number of outlets
- Diversity of outlets
- Critical interrogation of other 'estates'
- Connection with audiences

What are we evaluating in the first place?

At this early point it is important to acknowledge that how a problem is framed or defined largely determines the outcome of any investigation into that problem. It is therefore worthwhile first of all, to grapple with the issue of semantics, and pin down exactly what it is these criteria are attempting to assess. What exactly are we evaluating in the first place? For the purposes of this paper, I will avoid conservative definitions of the term which refer only to the profession's idealised, 'high modern' form (see Hallin 1994, 170). Instead, we should be looking at 'TV news as a form of cultural discourse, rather than information' and something that serves to 'link the viewer and his/her everyday life to the larger world in a manner which is ritualistic, symbolic and ultimately mythic' (Dahlgren 1988, 289). If we do this, then our conception of journalism must account for more than just the semiotic features (i.e. generic elements) which tend to define it. We therefore should move past a simplistic judgement on the textual form of journalism, and move our attention to its function, and an assessment of what a text is offering its audience in terms of political knowledge and/or engagement[i]; or, as I have suggested before (2008, 278), 'start thinking less about who (or

what) is producing the information, and think more in terms of the ends that may/may not be achieved as a result.' If we instead remember that 'journalistic' undertakings are not the exclusive domain of 'news' programs we might usefully build into this evaluation a clearer sense that traditional, 'old' models of news broadcasting are now simply one kind of journalism amongst many. The hurdle that must be overcome, however, as John Corner (1995, 54) recognises, is that ''The News' [genre]… [is] perceived as so closely related to the events themselves as to not warrant separate identification.' In this paper, then, I wish to properly investigate journalism as a cultural product, rather than journalism as a business, or 'The News' as a genre.

Number of Outlets

The first of the four measures discussed in this paper (and my assessment of it) is the simplest and probably least contentious; it is the quantity of journalism that is generally available to the average citizen. That, assuming journalism is healthy, we would have more of its output (i.e. news) being produced, and when it is in crisis we would tend to see less of it being produced.

Perhaps the defining narrative of the news media over the past decade has been not just an increase, but an absolute explosion of this output. We now live in an age where anyone with a computer and an internet connection can read newspaper content from around the world. It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves of how recent this phenomenon is, and how significant it is. In his book Cultural Chaos, Brian McNair's (2006: 1) notes that 'the news' within the wider media sphere was for a long time relatively small and isolated, and was easy to 'define' as newspapers, and the daily newscasts of the free-to-air television networks and a handful of radio stations. However, McNair argues that we are now living in a state of media 'chaos', and we have witnessed an exponential increase in the number of forms of journalism available to the average consumer. We now live in an era of multichannelling, 24-hour cable news – including many transnational satellite broadcasters (pan-Arab media network Al Jazeera, for example) – online global news streaming, blogs, vlogs and, a general expansion in the quantity of news output. Bruns (2005, 11-30) suggests because in our digital age there is so much news and information already (freely) circulating within the public sphere, there has emerged a form of online journalism, the practitioners of which act not as 'gatekeepers' – reporters who decide what is news, gather it and attempt to generate discrete news reports – but instead as 'gatewatchers', whose aim is to signpost, sort, interpret, and/or check the avalanche of news and information that is already available.

Diversity of outlets

The next measure of journalism's health is diversity of its output. Diversity is an important metric, and is more important than sheer volume, because if there's lots of news outlets all saying the same thing in the same way, then there's not much point in having that volume in the first place – all we have then is an echo chamber.

While the number of journalism's potential delivery channels are increasing rapidly (as per my previous point), so too are the range of journalistic styles, genres and repertoires that fill them. Journalism used to be much more homogenous, and its quality was often measured on the accuracy of its attempt to emulate the idealised form. It was strictly objective, authoritative, serious and rational. Now, however, we still have those highly traditional, idealised, 'high modern' forms (see Hallin 1994, 170), but they now coexist with all manner of other forms too. From the popularpolitical documentaries of Michael Moore or Morgan Spurlock, to the serious, long-form current affairs journalism of Frontline or 4 Corners. From The Naked News, to C-Span. From Dan Rather to the amateur blogger. From the tabloid, to the deeply serious. We have seen a general willingness on the part of the media to try new news formats and styles, be unconventional, and push the boundaries of acceptance in all directions. All these disparate forms exist now in the public sphere, and are providing a far more three-dimensional picture of our world than ever before. Indeed, is has been said that the 'diversification of television journalism both within the mainstream… and scattered unevenly throughout the television schedule' has brought 'us closer than ever to some sort of messy representation of the complexities of the contemporary world' (Holland 2001, 92). And, I would argue that the more varied and diverse journalisms we have, the better off we will be in deconstructing the behaviour of political actors, because journalism is becoming increasingly heterogeneous, and much harder to singularly 'manipulate'.

All this, however, is not to say that diversity might not have its potential problems. I think there should be (legitimate) criticisms about this diversity breaking up our 'public conversation' (Turner 2005, 149) into smaller, more private conversations – that Habermas' public sphere has, in the words of Todd Gitlin (1998, 173), '... shattered into a scatter of globules, like mercury'. Whereas Twenty years ago Henningham (1988, 197) was quite positive about the prospect of a 'new sensitivity' to particular groups, and sub-cultures within the community for their news programming,

the ‘latitudes of acceptance’ theory would suggest that where people now have the ability to seek out all different kinds of news, they will merely seek out that which reinforce their opinion.

Critical interrogation of the other ‘estates’

The previous two criteria for evaluating the relative ‘health’ of journalism were quantitative assessments of the depth and breadth of journalism in our society. This criteria (and perhaps the most obvious) is the first qualitative one, noting the importance of quality, because, put simply, more quantity and diversity does not always mean better journalism. If journalism is the ‘fourth estate’, or at least is supposed to be, then a vital measure of its quality is obviously its ability to hold the other ‘estates’ to account; to adequately fulfil its side of the social contract to act as public advocates and representatives – or society’s ‘score-keepers’ (Conley 1997, ix). If journalism is meant to strive to serve the ‘vigilant citizen who must be properly informed’ (McGuigan 1998, 98) in order to make ‘informed choices’ (Winch 1997, 114), then the only way that this will happen is if it adequately accomplish the job it sets out to achieve.

For the most part, thoughts on this matter are very negative, citing the apparent lack of ‘hard’ journalism in our society now (see, for instance, Beecher 2005). In particular, the concern has been over the apparently submissive role of the press in the political climate between 2001 and 2008: a period during which many have discussed as a post-9/11 crisis of professional credibility (see, for example, Zelizer and Allan 2002, 69-116; McChesney 2003). Toby Miller (2007, 79-111) provides a very comprehensive critique of the US media’s response to these pressures during this ‘War on Terror’. He points out that in the wake of the largest terrorist attacks Americans had ever seen, rational analysis of the events and in-depth historically-informed dissection of US foreign policy were replaced by “brash and faulty reportage” and shallow commentary, peppered with militarism, patriotism and nationalism (Miller 2007, 81-82). The FOX News Network was at the forefront of this sentiment, as its anchors and reporters showed a great degree of ignorance of the reasons behind the US invasion of Iraq and a dismissive attitude towards civilian deaths and injuries. Writer Michael Wolff, for example, was called “unpatriotic” by FOX News for doing nothing more than openly questioning the practice of embedding journalists in the military (Miller 2007, 88).

In spite of all this concern about the weakened interrogation of power, I would argue that we’ve still seen a significant amount of journalism hold the powerful to account in ways that were simply not

possible some ten or twenty years ago. Because "greater restriction often produces greater creativity in finding ways to circumvent such restriction" (Gray 2006b, 115), the diversity of journalism output has allowed it to bypass the normal modes of restriction and had a clearly positive effect of increased public transparency. No matter your political stance on their operation, the fact Wikileaks has released some half-million secretive documents freely to a global audience in 2010 alone is quite a good index, showing how free and accessible highly-damaging information now is. Then-Presidential hopeful Barack Obama was caught off-guard in April 2008, when he was recorded by a blogger (who later contributed the story to The Huffington Post) at a fundraising event suggesting that Pennsylvanians cling to guns and religion as a way of soothing their personal grievances against the federal government, all the while believing there were no members of 'the media' present. Australian Journalist Annabel Crabb uses a similar example:

> How could Hillary Clinton possibly have foreseen, accepting a welcoming kiss from a young girl after disembarking her aircraft in Bosnia in 1996, that the absence of sniper fire from the footage of her arrival would prove an intense political embarrassment to her twelve years later? And that YouTube would brand her a liar? (Crabb 2010)

It is worth remembering, for instance, that President John F. Kennedy's sexual exploits – much like Franklin D. Roosevelt's leg braces (see Hallin 1994, 173) – were "an open secret to the political journalists of the time", and yet were not reported to the public (McNair 2006, 11). We have far more light now being shed on what were once the darkest of dark rooms (sometimes even where it doesn't belong), and that is more than likely a positive sign.

Connection with audiences

The final (and most important) criterion that I wish to discuss in this paper is the connection between journalistic output and its audience. This is the most important criterion of all, because if we have lots of absolutely high-quality journalism, coming from a range of different outlets then that's all well and good. If that journalism is failing to find and engage a viewer, reader or listener, then there's no point it even existing in the first place. Even Keith Windschuttle (1998, 41) once said that the 'measure of journalists' success is their relationship with their audience', perhaps implying that journalism is largely useless unless it is seen by someone.

Now, the pessimists might point to declining circulation figures for newspapers, or the falling ratings for television news programs as evidence that public connection with journalism is falling. However, as discussed previously, I do not see these as the only domains of journalism, and simply using quantitative readership/viewership figures to measure the quality of the journalist—citizen relationship is, at the very least, an insipid measure. Besides that, I would contend that most of these figures only point to the overall decline in the consumption of a few newspapers or TV programs which are pre-ordained as 'quality' news sources. It is well within the realms of possibility that the enormous volume of journalism now on offer (see above) has simply divided the increasing public attention. Because that attention is now spread over a massively increased range of sources, it merely appears on the surface as though people are paying less attention to it, when in fact the opposite my indeed be the case. This points to the fraught nature of long-term quantitative data, because the social and technological conditions today are so different to what they used to be just two decades ago.

So, if raw statistics are largely useless when we are talking about engagement, I would say it is far more valuable to think about the now multifarious ways audiences can now engage with the news. Whereas once upon a time, the audience played an extremely passive role in the newsmaking process, and had to be content with being a mere receptacle for the information presented to them, citizens are increasingly playing active roles in journalism. Now they are given direct email addresses of their newsrooms (and in some cases, specific journalists), are able to become part of a studio audience, contribute questions to a debate or interview, follow newsmakers on Twitter, suggest story ideas (via a range of platforms), watch clips or videos in their own time, stand outside a glass-walled studio during a newscast (see Harrington 2010), or even become journalists themselves with access to just a laptop and internet connection. Engagement then, is now much more than just accepting what is presented to us from on high. Now we can throw information or feedback in the other direction with such ease and speed, or play an active role in the propagation of a story (in the sending of an online story's URL to friends via email, for instance), and help to make things 'go viral'.

Conclusion: For love, not money

I write this paper merely as a provocation. Not so much to say that journalism is in rude health, but simply to say that we should have some objective criteria attached to the often highly pessimistic accounts of where journalism is in our society and how effectively it's functioning. I do not wish to

suggest that the four criteria I have discussed here are definitive in any way, but aim merely to start a conversation which might usefully lead to better ones which might more accurately measure the health of journalism. Indeed, my biggest hope is that my main contribution to such a debate would be in regards to what has been left off my list of criteria. In particular, the absence of any measures of economic profitability, which for some reason have managed to become only actual quantifiable measures that ever crop up in these analyses. For some reason, so much of the debate around journalism has become 'business-centric', which mourn the forthcoming death of 'good' journalism because there's not nearly as much money to be made from it now. At the aforementioned 'Journalism in Crisis' conference, Todd Gitlin's keynote presentation discussed what I would call the 'symptoms' of a perceived crisis. Two out of what he saw as five 'wolves at the door' were declining circulation of newspapers, and their badly damaged profitability, exacerbated by declining advertising revenue:

> Overall, newspaper circulation has dropped 13.5% for the dailies and 17.3% for the Sunday editions since 2001; almost 5% just in 2008. In what some are calling the Great Recession, advertising revenue is down—23% over the last two years—even as paper costs are up. Nearly one out of every five journalists working for newspapers in 2001 is now gone. Foreign bureaus have been shuttered—all those of the Boston Globe, for example, New England's major paper. I recently met the Chicago Tribune's South Asia correspondent, responsible for India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, with five years of experience there. Having been recalled to work on the Metro desk in Chicago, she resigned. (Gitlin 2009)

One of the things I do want to argue against is this simplistic measure of the health of journalism which focuses narrowly on the decline of one medium (i.e. newspapers) and its associated failing business models. If we were to step back to a time when journalism was outrageously profitable, is there anything to suggest that those profits were actually re-invested into the production of 'high modern' journalism? William Randolph Hearst may have been extraordinarily wealthy thanks to the profitability of newspapers in the early 20th century, but that doesn't mean that the quality of journalism in those newspapers was especially good. So, to suggest that today, the profitability of journalism is suddenly an adequate measure of its quality, seems absurd. The two are simply separate issues.

Yes, I acknowledge that journalism is an expensive undertaking that requires a lot of time and money to make, but when journalism was highly profitable, many saw this as deeply problematic

because it was then subject to takeovers by those people who simply wanted to make a buck, rather than perform some sort of valuable social function. So, now that newspapers are in the decline, and people aren't making money from them like they used to, why is it that we now want to cling to this economic assessment of journalism's health? In fact, I argue that it is an extraordinary hypocrisy that journalists so often defend the value of their profession by saying theirs is 'not just another business' (Schultz 1994), and yet when it's losing profitability, we treat it as though it is. Australian newsman Eric Beecher (Beecher 2000), for example, defended journalism ten years ago by saying that it is 'a public trust', and mourned the fact that 'commercialism rather than idealism dominates'. So, why is the failing commercial model now apparently of most concern? Given that 'quality' journalism is about 'service' over 'profit' (Harrington 2008, 269), why does this not apply when things turn bad also? If the media, as Turner (2001, 352) points out, 'constitute a cultural as well as a commercial industry [where] many of the normal commercial rules about product development and investment do not apply', then it seems that we should be applying that logic universally – in good times as well as bad.

Again I write this paper as a provocation, not an ideological tome. Indeed, I would lovingly welcome a broader academic debate in which journalism scholars posited their own set of criteria, or indeed made a more pessimistic assessment based on the ones proposed in this paper. I have simply suggested that on these four measures we can be pretty optimistic about where journalism is right now and (unlike many scholars) have great hope about where it might be in the near future.

Notes

[i] Hartley (1996, 41) suggests this prioritisation of "production, origin, [etc.]… over consumption, destination, diffusion…" is "a classic symptom of modernism"

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